

SOME ASPECTS IN THE OCCUPATIONAL
ADJUSTMENT OF THE BLIND

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Some Aspects in the Occupational Adjustment of the Blind*

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The author, Reader in Industrial Psychology in the University of Cambridge, stresses the need for avoidance of undue strain in occupations chosen by the blind: they must not be thus reminded of their handicap. They must also be assured of generous financial remuneration: this applies especially to minor academic posts accepted by those who would be happier in simpler but better-paid work, employing their recognized, though not outstanding, intellectual ability in their leisure time. The gainful occupations of the blind must not entail so much fatigue that they cannot be adequately dissipated during leisure. Nor must they impose too great a strain on the sighted people with whom they have to work. The concept of social adjustment and the provision of non-vocational education are especially important in the care of the blind.

OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE IN RELATION TO MENTAL ABILITY

OCCUPATIONAL adjustment in general, if it is to be really effective, must take into account not merely the abilities of the individual, but also the factors which tend to satisfy the demands of his personality. There is evidence from recent work on the relation of mental ability to occupational performance which shows that in many occupations differing in economic and social status the mental levels required for effective performance are not significantly different. There is a significant difference between the mental levels of occupations at the extremes of the occupational range, for instance between the professions and the unskilled trades; but there is a very large number of occupations which differ in their rewards but which are well within the mental capacity of those in the middle ranges of mental ability.

In so far as this is true, mental ability and other measurable psychological functions cannot be regarded as positive indications of the occupation that should be followed. They can only be regarded as an indication of an individual's qualifications. Whatever the limit of these qualifications, there is a large number of occupations in which they can be appropriately used. There is a more varied choice in the middle ranges than at either of the extremes; but throughout the whole range of

* Read at a meeting of the British Psychological Society on 30th March, 1946.

the frequency-distribution curve of mental ability, there is a wide choice of occupation.

This must not be taken to imply that variations in intelligence do not correspond with variations in performance within an occupation, but only that the mean mental levels of those gainfully employed in a large number of occupations in the middle ranges do not differ significantly. From this it follows that mental level is not the predominant determinant in occupational choice but a qualifying one, and that the final choice must be determined within a range of occupations by other factors.

APPLICABILITY TO THE VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE OF THE BLIND

If this attitude is adopted in the vocational guidance of the blind, a slightly different approach will follow from that which is more usually adopted. It will not be what is the highest occupation that the mental ability of a blind man makes it possible for him to follow, but rather in which of a large number of occupations falling within his mental range he would be most happily employed.

In order that a blind man may be successful in any occupation, it is probable that he needs a slightly higher level of intelligence than the mean level to be found in that occupation. Man is pre-eminently a visualist, and his accurate and rapid response to visual stimuli is so highly developed that conscious inference enters into it to only a small extent. The non-visual receptors of the blind are not more acute than those of the sighted, though by constant practice the blind learn to use their non-visual cues to a far greater extent than the sighted; but in this process conscious inference plays a greater part than in reaction to visual stimuli. The blind are called upon to use less perfect organs of orientation and therefore depend to a greater extent on their higher mental processes in their attempts to co-ordinate with the outside world.

LEVELS OF MENTAL ABILITY AMONG THE BLIND

From the vocational standpoint the blind fall naturally into three categories. The first and simplest category consists of those in the lower levels of mental ability. They can be taught simple occupations at which they can earn their living in ways not very dissimilar from what they would do if they were sighted. In many institutions training is offered in too few occupations so that the men in this category are not given sufficient choice of employment. But during the war blind persons have worked in many new occupations and have held their own among their sighted fellow-workers; and there is little doubt that the range of choice could be still further extended. Previously intelligence tests were not sufficiently used in the vocational guidance of the blind, and this re-

sulted in certain people with good mental ability being trained in simple trades when they could be better employed elsewhere.

The second category of blind persons consists of those with exceptionally high mental ability. There are few in this category, because high mental ability is rare in any community and, the blind being a relatively small community, the number of highly gifted people in it is proportionally rare. The vocational placement of these people is not very difficult. They are able, in spite of their blindness, to study any subject at a university except those involving experimental technique. They can undertake administrative work at a high level and their ability raises them to a position which, among the sighted, would carry with it the assistance of a private secretary. They are often very able administrators and appear to me in some respects to have certain advantages over their sighted fellows. Their memory for facts is so highly developed that they are less dependent on information from files and so are able to arrive at conclusions more rapidly.

The third vocational category of the blind is composed of those persons falling in the middle ranges of mental ability. They may find the simpler occupations which are easy to learn not sufficiently exacting to satisfy their mental life, and they are not capable of filling the higher posts which automatically carry with them the services of a secretary. It is the people in this category that present the vocational adviser with the most difficult problems, and it is here that he can make his most serious mistakes. He can be so easily tempted to suggest that a blind man whose mental ability is above average should train for some superior occupation without realizing its full implications.

THE AVOIDANCE OF UNDUE STRAIN IN THE OCCUPATION CHOSEN

Probably the most important aspect in the occupational adjustment of the blind is that whatever they do they should do well and not just be able to do it. When the former is the case, the blind person is, and feels that he is, a fully contributing member of society. When the latter is the case, he is under constant strain and his partial success cannot give him the same feeling of satisfaction as comes from the realization that he is doing something useful and doing it well.

There is a saying that the blind can do anything that the sighted can do except see. It is a magnificent conception and has certainly helped many a blinded man to adjust to blindness and rise above his handicap. Entry into blindness often develops a man's character to a remarkable degree so that he may become a richer personality than when he was sighted; it cannot, however, alter the level of a man's intelligence. If the courageous adjustment to blindness takes the form of attempting something that is really beyond the mental ability of an individual, it may

end in failure or in only partial success; and this may be attributed to a man's physical disability, whereas it is primarily due to his lack of the necessary mental ability.

It is probably a misguided kindness to encourage blind persons of medium intelligence to enter occupations where their mental ability will be unduly strained. The main consideration in the vocational guidance of the blind is to adjust them to the sighted world so that they may feel truly at ease and not be constantly reminded of the handicap of blindness. This will not be attained if too much stress is put on the desirability of entering a superior occupation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADEQUATE FINANCIAL REWARD

It is important that the blind should be able to secure a comfortable income. When this is achieved many of the minor inconveniences of blindness can be overcome by paying for proper assistance. Over the course of a lifetime this means much to the happiness of the blind man and to that of his family. Sometimes an occupation may appear to be superior but does not in fact yield a satisfactory financial reward. Academic work is an example of such an occupation. Certain blind people are capable of undertaking such work; but whether they should do so or whether they should enter some other occupation providing better financial rewards, and use their intellectual gifts instead in writing or in some other spare-time occupation, must be carefully considered. If, at the end of much training and study, a blind person is only able to fill a minor academic or teaching post, he may not live a very happy life; whereas if he earned a satisfactory living in an easier way and devoted his intellectual ability to other self-determined efforts, the case might be otherwise. There is a real difference between the self-directed efforts of the blind and those imposed upon them when brought into direct competition with the sighted world.

I once met a very able young blind man with good intellectual ability and much charm of character. He had devised and constructed a highly ingenious apparatus to aid the vision of the partially blind. This had involved much thought and a great deal of labour; and the fact that this young man had achieved what he set out to do gave him real satisfaction. It is doubtful, however, whether he could have earned his living as a maker of scientific apparatus in competition with the sighted, for the odds would have been so much against him. If, however, he earned his living in some simple way, it is probable that he would be able to continue to devise scientific apparatus as a spare-time occupation. In doing so he would not have to compete with the time factor which is so important if one is earning one's living in a mechanical occupation. Such a spare-time occupation would, however, provide him with an intellectual oc-

cupation which would be a source of satisfaction and profit both to himself and others.

THE AVOIDANCE OF UNDUE FATIGUE

The blind, no less than the sighted, need an occupation which produces a degree of fatigue from which they can recuperate in their leisure. This alternation of effort and recuperation which is the basis of a well-regulated life has special significance for the blind, for they have much time on their hands which it is desirable to fill with satisfying occupations. If their gainful occupation is mentally so fatiguing that they can only just manage it, they may be too mentally exhausted during their leisure to get full benefit from the latter. If, however, it produces a moderate fatigue mainly physical in nature, they will be in the right mental condition to derive satisfaction from spare-time intellectual effort.

RELATIONS WITH SIGHTED WORKERS

The gainful occupation of the blind should not impose too great a strain on them nor on the sighted people with whom they work. If they are only just able to do their work, they may impose a constant strain on others which may give rise to feelings of impatience; and if this is the case, a blind man's life cannot be happy. If, however, a blind man's work does not set up these feelings among his sighted fellow-workers, a very real attitude of co-operation and understanding grows up, and this is the surest basis for a happy and useful life for the blind.

CONCLUSIONS

I would sum up by saying that the attitude of the vocational adviser to the blind should be strongly realistic and based mainly on the concept of social adjustment. Blind persons should not be sent indiscriminately into a few simple trades that are easy to teach. Neither should they be unduly encouraged to take up so-called 'superior' occupations. They should be guided into occupations that are well within their mental capacity and likely to produce generous remuneration. Special attention should be devoted to the leisure pursuits of blind persons, for these pursuits play a larger part in their lives than in those of the sighted who can distract themselves with activities denied to the blind. Non-vocational education is most important for the blind, and much attention should be paid to it particularly in the case of those with mental ability above the average. Their education should not be merely a training towards the end of earning a living, but should include an education on a wider basis that will enable them to fill their leisure time with worth-while pursuits and so help in their social adjustment. The handicap of blindness must be frankly recognized, but it need not carry with it the added handicap of

social mal-adjustment. Those of us who have mixed with the blind know how happily many of them are adjusted and what pleasure their society gives. We also know the strain that arises when they are attempting something beyond their capacity, or the boredom they suffer when their minds are insufficiently furnished to deal with their leisure. I think that much more could be done than at present to help in the social adjustment of the blind, and that a sound vocational policy is a real way of contributing towards it.

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